

Asian-Americans, long used as a racial wedge, are confronting anti-Black racism in their own communities

By [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 21, 2020, 10:24 a.m.



Sam Hyun, a member of the state's Asian American Commission and executive director of the Korean-American Citizens League of New England, says it was "incredibly painful" to see a Hmong-American police officer argue with bystanders in Minneapolis while George Floyd gasped for breath. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

In George Floyd's final moments, captured on video, Tou Thao, a Hmong-American police officer in Minneapolis, argued with bystanders while his white colleague pressed his knee against Floyd's neck. As Floyd gasped for air, the crowd pleaded for the dying man's life. Thao responded, "He's talking, so he can breathe."

For 28-year-old Sam Hyun, the actions of Thao, who has been charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder, encapsulated the worst stereotypes he's heard about Asian-Americans: silent, compliant, and complicit in the systemic oppression of Black people.

“It was incredibly painful. I was ashamed,” said Hyun, a graduate student at Brandeis University and executive director of the Korean-American Citizens League of New England. “All our credibility went out the window. How dare we ask the Black community to stand with us when we haven't even addressed the anti-Blackness within our own community?”

As part of the national reckoning on racial injustice, many Asian-Americans are grappling with their own communities' fraught histories of anti-Blackness, at a time when anti-Asian sentiment, fueled by the coronavirus pandemic, has surged. Knotty conversations among Asian-American family members and colleagues are playing out, sometimes painfully, in private and in public, about the ways in which they have benefited from and participated in anti-Black racism. These tensions surfaced recently in Massachusetts as prominent Asian-American leaders sparred over the wording in a statement of solidarity with the Black community.

“This is sort of a long overdue conversation with the [Asian-American and Pacific Islander] community as well as in our society as a whole,” said Manisha Bewtra, a former Melrose city councilor and mayoral candidate, who spearheaded [a recent effort](#) with more than 140 Massachusetts-based Asian-American activists, organizers, and political leaders to express their commitment to uprooting anti-Black racism.

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“Our freedom is ultimately tied together,” Bewtra added, “and by supporting the community that is most harmed by our [country’s] policies, we actually will all rise up in the process.”

Asian-Americans have long occupied a strange space in American culture and society, of both invisibility and conditional acceptance. They are either erased in the Black and white binary of the nation’s racial politics or deployed as a convenient cudgel against other racial and ethnic groups by conservative pundits, who point to their supposed success as an indicator of American fairness.

Prior to the 1950s and ’60s, Asian-Americans were vilified as a “yellow peril,” an undesirable, alien menace. But immigration reform in 1965 allowed an influx of highly skilled and educated Asian professionals to settle in the United States. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, politicians, social scientists, and journalists extolled Asian-Americans as “model minorities” — hard-working, law-abiding citizens capable of assimilating into white society — in an attempt to deny the existence of the entrenched institutional racism that Black Americans were protesting.

“Those kinds of claims certainly were based on a selective reading,” said Ellen Wu, a historian at Indiana University and author of [“The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority.”](#) The Asian-American population is [incredibly diverse](#), representing dozens of countries, languages, and cultures. The model minority trope masks huge disparities among Asian ethnic groups, including the disproportionate

hardships of Southeast Asians who arrived as refugees and face [high rates of poverty and unemployment](#).

Asian-Americans tend to be more progressive on issues of racial equality, said Janelle Wong, an American studies professor at the University of Maryland. Indeed, according to a [June survey](#) by the Pew Research Center, 75 percent of Asian-Americans said they support the Black Lives Matter movement, compared with 60 percent of white, 77 percent of Hispanic, and 86 percent of Black respondents. Almost two-thirds of Asian-Americans surveyed by Pew said they have talked about race or racial equality with family or friends, and one in 10 have attended a recent protest or rally.

However, “There are some contradictions,” Wong noted. “I think there are straight-up racist attitudes in our community that are a form of our own internalized racism. You see racism among Asian-Americans. You see colorism among Asian-Americans. Asian-Americans are not immune from [that].”

Tensions between Blacks and Asian-Americans famously exploded during the Los Angeles riots of 1992. A year earlier, a Korean liquor store owner shot and killed Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old Black girl, who she believed had stolen a bottle of orange juice. When riots broke out following the acquittal of the LA police officers who savagely beat Rodney King, thousands of Korean-owned businesses were damaged or destroyed.

In recent years, Asian-Americans have emerged as the most vocal and visible opponents of affirmative action in education, despite [national polling](#) that shows they are more likely to favor than oppose race-based admissions policies. In 2014, Asian-American students mounted a lawsuit challenging Harvard University’s use of affirmative action, arguing that the policy intentionally discriminated against Asian applicants in favor of Black and Latino candidates. A federal judge ruled against them last year, but the plaintiffs are appealing the decision with support from President Trump’s administration.

But acknowledging this rift has proved challenging. Last month, Asian-American civic leaders and activists [argued over a public letter](#) by the state's Asian American Commission in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, which cited the community's "deep roots of anti-Blackness" and "historic proximity to white privilege." Some commissioners said they were offended by those claims, which they blamed on the commission's younger members. Fitchburg Senator Dean A. Tran said those responsible for issuing the letter should resign.

The commission's chairwoman, Vira Douangmany Cage, who immigrated to the United States as a refugee from Laos, dismissed those complaints.

"I think it is deeply offensive to ignore or to deny there's anti-Blackness in our community," Cage said in a recent interview. "It shows, I think, a lack of education or understanding for the plight of Black people."

Hyun, who is also a member of the commission and helped draft the public letter, agreed with Cage.

"There's this misconception that Asians are silent, that we are complicit, and I think it's easy to find the ones that are and make that generalization. . . . But Asian-Americans have a long history of protesting and fighting," he said, invoking the names of Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, legendary Asian-American activists in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and '70s. "The difficult part is where do we stand?"

Hyun and Cage doubled down on those convictions in a [video](#) released last week featuring several other Asian-American activists and political leaders pledging their allegiance with the Black community in the fight against racism.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Asian-Americans are increasingly confronting anti-Black racism as reports of anti-Asian harassment have spiked amid the pandemic. According to [another Pew Survey](#), nearly one-third of Asian-Americans have been subjected to slurs

or jokes since the outbreak began, and about one in four said they fear physical harm or threats.

Melanie Liu, who is 27 and works for an advertising agency in downtown Boston, said her own experiences with anti-Asian racism have only affirmed her support for the Black Lives Matter movement. She recalled a painful moment, early in the pandemic, while riding a bus. She was the only passenger wearing a mask when a stranger accosted her and said, “If it weren’t for you people, we wouldn’t be in this [expletive] mess.”

“After the news about George Floyd came out, I felt so guilty. The worst thing I have ever had to encounter is that someone said something [expletive] to me,” Liu said. “I never felt threatened physically. I haven’t been assaulted.”

Since Floyd’s killing, Liu, like many others, has ordered a bevy of books by Black and Asian authors so she can better navigate thorny conversations on race and racism, especially with her parents, Chinese immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh. She spoke with her father, who lives in Orlando, on FaceTime last month as anti-police-brutality protests roiled the nation, and was relieved as he nodded in agreement when she noted human lives were more important than shattered windows. These discussions about anti-Black racism are difficult, Liu said, because she doesn’t want to diminish her parents’ own struggles with prejudice and discrimination, but necessary.

“The thing that really made me want to speak out and talk about issues that affect the Black community is the fact that I will never have to walk a day in their shoes,” she said. “The least I can do is talk about the issues they want to be circulated.”

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